

Chapter 14
"History and Description of Africa"
(1526)
Leo Africanus

Introduction

Al-Hassan ibn-Muhammad al-Wazzan al-Fasi, better known as Leo Africanus, was probably born in the 1460s in Granada, the last Muslim toehold in Spain, but was raised in Fez (in modern Morocco). He died in 1554. Educated in Islamic law, he entered the service of the sultan of Fez, who sent him on commercial and diplomatic missions across sub-Saharan West Africa. During one such mission, he was captured by Christian pirates and brought to Rome in 1518, where Pope Leo X persuaded him to accept Christianity.

While in Rome in 1526 he completed in Italian his *History and Description of Africa*, probably based on an earlier version he had written in Arabic. It recounts his observations during his travels in Africa and became a principal source of European knowledge of the region. In the following excerpts, Leo describes several states he visited in the western part of the Sudan, the extensive grass-covered plain that stretches across Africa south of the Sahara. When Leo visited the region in the early 1500's, the strongest state was the Songhai Empire, in which the two most important cities were Gao, the capital, and Timbuktu, which was ruled by a governor in the name of the emperor. Because of this work he became known as Leo Africanus, Latin for Leo the African.

Questions to Consider

- Based on the details Leo chose to include in his description of Africa, who might his intended audience have been? What interest might that audience have had in Africa?
- What important differences, if any, did Leo see between African and European society?

THE KINGDOM OF MALI

In this kingdom there is a large and ample village containing more than six thousand families, and named Mali, which is also the name of the whole kingdom. Here the king has his residence. The region itself yields great abundance of wheat, meat and cotton. Here are many craftsmen and merchants in all places: and yet the king honorably entertains all strangers. The inhabitants are rich and have plenty of merchandise. Here is a great number of temples, clergymen, and teachers, who read their lectures in the mosques because they have no colleges at all. The people of the region excel all other Negroes in wit, civility, and industry, and were the first that embraced the law of Muhammad....

THE CITY OF TIMBUKTU

All its houses are ... cottages, built of mud and covered with thatch. However, there is a most

1 stately mosque to be seen, whose walls are made of stone and lime, and a princely palace also
2 constructed by the highly skilled craftsmen of Granada. Here there are many shops of artisans
3 and merchants, especially of those who weave linen and cotton, and here Barbary merchants
4 bring European cloth. The inhabitants, and especially resident aliens, are exceedingly rich, since
5 the present king married both of his daughters to rich merchants. Here are many wells,
6 containing sweet water. Whenever the Niger River overflows, they carry the water into town by
7 means of sluices. This region yields great quantities of grain, cattle, milk, and butter, but salt is
8 very scarce here, for it is brought here by land from Tegaza, which is five hundred miles away.
9 When I was there, I saw one camel-load of salt sold for eighty ducats.

10
11 The rich king of Timbuktu has many plates and scepters of gold, some of which weigh 1,300
12 pounds, and he keeps a magnificent and well-furnished court. When he travels anywhere, he
13 rides upon a camel, which is led by some of his noblemen. He does so likewise when going to
14 war, and all his soldiers ride upon horses. Whoever wishes to speak to this king must first of all
15 fall down before his feet and then taking up earth must sprinkle it on his own head and shoulders.
16 ... [The king] always has under arms 3,000 horsemen and a great number of foot soldiers who
17 shoot poisoned arrows. They often skirmish with those who refuse to pay tribute and whomever
18 they capture they sell to the merchants of Timbuktu. Here very few horses are bred. ... Their best
19 horses are brought out of North Africa. As soon as the king learns that any merchants have come
20 to the town with horses, he commands that a certain number be brought before him. Choosing
21 the best horse for himself, he pays a most liberal price for it....

22
23 Here are great numbers of religious teachers, judges, scholars and other learned persons, who are
24 bountifully maintained at the king's expense. Here too are brought various manuscripts or written
25 books from Barbary, which are sold for more money than any other merchandise.

26
27 The coin of Timbuktu is gold, without any stamp or inscription, but in matters of small value
28 they use certain shells from the kingdom of Persia. Four hundred of these are worth a ducat, and
29 six pieces of Timbuktu's golden coin weigh two-thirds of an ounce.

30
31 The inhabitants are gentle and cheerful and spend a great part of the night in singing and dancing
32 throughout the city streets. They keep large numbers of male and female slaves, and their town is
33 greatly vulnerable to fire. At the time of my second visit, almost half the town burned down in
34 the space of five hours.

35 36 ***THE TOWN AND KINGDOM OF GAO***

37
38 Here are very rich merchants and to here journey continually large numbers of Negroes who
39 purchase here cloth from Barbary and Europe. The town abounds in grain and meat but lacks
40 wine, trees and fruits. However, there are plenty of melons, lemons and rice. Here there are many
41 wells, which also contain very sweet and wholesome water. Here also is a certain place where
42 slaves are sold, especially upon those days when merchants assemble. A young slave of fifteen
43 years of age is sold for six ducats, and children are also sold.

44
45 The king of this region has a certain private palace in which he keeps a large number of
46 concubines and slaves, who are watched by eunuchs. To guard his person he maintains a

1 sufficient troop of horsemen and foot soldiers. Between the first gate of the palace and the inner
2 part, there is a walled enclosure wherein the king personally decides all of his subjects
3 controversies. Although the king is most diligent in this regard and conducts all business in these
4 matters, he has in his company counsellors and such other officers as his secretaries, treasurers,
5 stewards and auditors.

6
7 It is a wonder to see the quality of merchandise that is daily brought here and how costly and
8 sumptuous everything is. Horses purchased in Europe for ten ducats are sold here for forty and
9 sometimes fifty ducats apiece. There is not European cloth so coarse as to sell for less than four
10 ducats an ell. If it is anywhere near fine quality, they will give fifteen ducats for an ell, and an ell
11 of the scarlet of Venice or of Turkish cloth is here worth thirty ducats. A sword is here valued at
12 three or four crowns, and likewise are spears, bridles and similar commodities, and spices are all
13 sold at a high rate. However, of all other items, salt is the most expensive.

14
15 The rest of this kingdom contains nothing but villages and hamlets inhabited by herdsmen and
16 shepherds, who in winter cover their bodies with the skins of animals, but in summer they go
17 naked, save for their private parts. ... They are an ignorant and rude people, and you will scarcely
18 find one learned person in the square of a hundred miles. They are continually burdened by
19 heavy taxes; to the point that they scarcely have anything left on which to live.

20 21 ***THE KINGDOM OF BORNO***

22
23 They have a most powerful prince. ... He has in readiness as many as three thousand horsemen
24 and a huge number of foot soldiers; for all his subjects are so serviceable and obedient to him,
25 that whenever he commands them, they will arm themselves and will follow him wherever he
26 leads them. They pay him no tribute except tithes on their grain; neither does the king have any
27 revenues to support his state except the spoils he gets from his enemies by frequent invasions and
28 assaults. He is in a state of perpetual hostility with a certain people who live beyond the desert of
29 Seu, who in times past marching with a huge army of footsoldiers over the said desert,
30 devastated a great part of the Kingdom of Borno. Whereupon the king sent for the merchants of
31 Barbary and ordered them to bring him a great store of horses: for in this country they exchange
32 horses for slaves, and sometimes give fifteen or twenty slaves for a horse. And by this means
33 there were a great many horses bought although the merchants were forced to stay for their
34 slaves until the king returned home as a conqueror with a great number of captives, and satisfied
35 his creditors for his horses. Frequently it happens that the merchants must stay three months
36 before the king returned from the wars. ... Sometimes he does not bring home enough slaves to
37 satisfy the merchants and sometimes they are forced to wait a whole year. ... And yet the king
38 seems marvelously rich, because his spurs, bridles, platters, dishes, pots and other vessels are
39 made of gold. The king is extremely covetous and would rather pay his debts in slaves rather
40 than gold.